

Week Ending Friday, February 12, 1999

Remarks at a Gala Honoring Hank Aaron in Atlanta, Georgia

February 5, 1999

Thank you very much, Tom. I want to thank Ted and Jane and you, Tom, and Gerry Levin and all the people from CNN and Time Warner for your role in this magnificent evening—all the sponsors, all the previous speakers.

You know, the truth is, I wanted to come down yesterday just to get ready for this. *[Laughter]* I saw the list of the baseball players who were going to be here. You know, my job is not always the most fun in the world. *[Laughter]* I was interested in this.

Governor Barnes told a story about Hank Aaron appearing with him. I want to tell you a story that's even more compelling. In 1992, on the weekend before the Presidential election, I was struggling to prevail in Georgia and Governor Miller said, "You have to come one more time. And if you come, I think Hank Aaron will appear with you."

I forgot about how many electoral votes we had—I forgot, you know, I just—so I came. And we went out to this high school football stadium, which held 25,000 people—it was completely full. Way over half of them came to see him. *[Laughter]* Three days later, after Hank Aaron blessed me in front of 25,000 people, we carried Georgia by 13,000 votes. *[Laughter]* I have never forgotten it, and I never will.

Ladies and gentlemen, the essayist Jacques Barzun once wrote, "Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball." Well, probably more than any other sport, baseball revels in statistics. I wish we could have a contest tonight. We'd all know that Ty Cobb has the highest lifetime batting average and Cy Young the most wins; Mark McGwire, closely followed by Sammy Sosa, the most home runs in a single season. Most all of us here know that Henry Aaron has more baseball records than any

other single player: most RBI's, most extra base hits, the only player to hit at least 30 home runs in 15 seasons, at least 20 homers in 20 seasons. First, as you heard on the film, to reach 300 hits—3,000 hits and 500 home runs.

He also had an exquisite sense of timing. When he broke what appeared to be the most unbreakable record of all, he had the presence of mind to do it on opening night so all of us could plan to watch. Because Henry Aaron's story is so much the story of baseball and because it is the story of a changing America being manifest in baseball, knowing it is necessary to know the mind and heart of modern America.

All of us honor him tonight not only for the power of his swing but for the power of his spirit; not only for breaking records but for breaking barriers; not only for chasing his dream but even more for giving children, like those we saw tonight, the chance to chase theirs. From Mobile to Milwaukee to Atlanta, through a segregated South in the old Sally League where he was the only member of the team that didn't stay in the same motel, the only one who couldn't get served at the dinner counter, he moved through a changing America. And he changed the mind and heart of America.

When he came here, he had an interesting experience. Many of you have referenced tonight that when Hank Aaron approached Babe Ruth's record there was a dark, deep undercurrent which led him to get lots of hate letters and death threats so serious the FBI had to watch his home and the pall of violence began to hang over the games. But he said that very little of this mail came from Atlanta. And so as President of this whole country, I'd like to also take my hat off to Atlanta tonight.

When Andy Young was up here talking and then I saw the reference on the film by Mayor Allen, I remember as a boy growing up, burdened with the awful stain that the

crisis in the high school in my State's capital caused us, that every one of us who felt as I did envied Atlanta because it had a mayor and business leaders who said they were determined to be known as the city too busy to hate. And they gave us, all of us, Martin Luther King and John Lewis, and leaders like Andy Young and Maynard Jackson and so many more, too many to mention. It was fitting that a son of the South who braved the storms of segregation would come home to the most important baseball record of all and go indelibly into the mind and heart of America.

I came here tonight as a baseball fan, to remember a golden moment. I came as a friend, to thank a person who was there for me when I needed him in the worst way. I came here as President, to honor a great American—for courage and decency and dignity, for caring about all the kids coming along behind him, for giving them a chance to chase those dreams. America is a land of dreamers. Hank Aaron has made it even more so.

So Hank and Billye, we thank you for the path you blazed, for the voices you raised, for the helping hands you gave. We thank you. God bless you. *[Applause]* Thank you.

Now, don't sit down. I almost forgot my exit line. *[Laughter]* Ladies and gentlemen, our honoree, on the 25th anniversary of his 40th birthday and his 715th home run, Henry Aaron.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:40 p.m. in the Centennial Ballroom at the Hyatt Regency Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to W. Thomas Johnson, chairman, president, and chief executive officer, Cable News Network; Ted Turner, vice chairman, and Gerald M. Levin, chairman and chief executive officer, Time Warner, Inc.; Gov. Roy E. Barnes and former Gov. Zell Miller of Georgia; Mayor Bill Campbell and former Mayors Andrew Young, Ivan Allen Jr., and Maynard Jackson of Atlanta; Mr. Aaron's wife, Billye; and Mr. Turner's wife, actress Jane Fonda. The President also referred to the South Atlantic (Sally) League. This item was not received in time for publication in the appropriate issue.

The President's Radio Address

February 6, 1999

Good morning. Six years ago I determined Washington had to get off the sidelines and join the frontlines in the fight against crime. I committed my administration to recovering our streets from violence, to reclaiming our neighborhoods as safe havens for families. Since then we've pursued a new strategy of law enforcement based not on tough talk but on tougher penalties, better prevention, and the substantial, visible presence of community police.

This strategy is showing remarkable results. Since 1993, crime rates in America have fallen to the lowest point in a quarter century. Property crime is down. Violent crime has dropped 20 percent in the last 6 years. The murder rate is the lowest in 30 years. Americans can take pride in streets that are safer, but mostly they can take comfort in lives that are more secure.

There are many reasons that crime is in a sharp decline. Chief among them is our growing ability to keep guns out of the hands of criminals. Gun-related crime is on the wane, and it's no wonder. According to a recent report by the Justice Department, the background checks we required in the Brady law have put a stop to nearly a quarter-million handgun purchases. Thanks to Brady, we turn away more than 200 felons a day, sending them home empty handed instead of well-armed. And now that the instacheck system is in effect, we can conduct these checks in even less time. Retail gun stores, sporting goods stores, licensed gun dealers: They're all working to keep guns out of the hands of felons and fugitives.

But there's a loophole in the law, and criminals know how to exploit it. They go to gun shows. Last year there were more than 4,400 gun shows all across America. I come from a State where these shows are very popular. I have visited and enjoyed them over the years. I know they're the first place where many parents teach their children how to handle firearms safely.

But at the same time, at too many gun shows, criminals are buying guns with no